

David's secret

It's a story that connects powerfully with our imagination and perhaps that is why it is one of the best known and best loved of all biblical stories. We picture the scene: two armies lined up against each other for battle, a valley between them. One army, of the Philistines, is powerful and confident, certain of a quick victory. The other, the army of Israel, is fearful and dismayed, led by a king named Saul who is uncertain and troubled. And then this figure steps forth from the Philistine camp – a huge warrior, Goliath, bedecked in armour and weaponry. And he roars out defiantly, summoning an opponent with whom he will settle the outcome of the conflict. Let a champion from each side fight it out! Well, no-one fancies taking on this ogre. Fear grips the Israelites – we are told that when Saul and all Israel heard the taunts of this Philistine 'they were dismayed and greatly afraid'. And the tension rises and the Israelites stand humiliated by Goliath's taunts as no-one takes up Goliath's challenge. Then, suddenly, there appears this young lad, David, the youngest son in his family, a shepherd boy who comes bringing food to some of his brothers who are present at the scene. And David is appalled. Who is this who mocks not only his people but also the God of his people, the living God of Israel? Well, we know what happens. To the outrage of his brothers David steps forward, confronting Goliath but spurning the kind of weaponry and armour that protects him. As a shepherd he has his own arsenal, only it's rather different: five smooth pebbles and a sling. These have served him well in defending his sheep from bears and lions, and now they become the means of Goliath's spectacular downfall. So Israel is saved and the God of Israel vindicated.

Well, the attraction of this story lies partly in the different ways it can be interpreted. We can read it as a classic portrayal of the triumph of the underdog: when the odds are overturned and power is defeated by the powerless; the arrogant subverted by the humble and the proud displaced by the meek. There is something very satisfying about that – except, of course when we happen to be the odds-on favourite, or the powerful, or the proud who are humbled. Or perhaps we might interpret this story another

way - as prefiguring one who was yet to come; we might glimpse here a son of David who in due course would come to do battle on our behalf – one who would renounce conventional weapons of violence and before whom the giant Goliaths of sin and evil would fall. This is a story rich in symbolism and in hope.

This morning however this passage is paired rather creatively with a story about that one who was to come, Jesus, and an incident on a lake when a storm blew up and his disciples were threatened and terrified. And Jesus calms the storm. And putting these two stories together invites us to think of them in terms of overcoming great powers and forces that are arrayed against us, triumphing over things that would threaten us and destroy us. Here is the link between Goliath and the storm on the lake. Both are dangers too great for us, but which are defeated. And part of the power of these stories lies in the fact that all of us have been there, at least to some degree. All of us know that it is to be intimidated by giants before whom we feel small and powerless; all of us have experienced storms where we feel out of our depth and the chaos is relentless and we are frightened for there seems to be no way out. And so these stories grab our imagination and address us.

Well, with that in mind let me tell you about a book which I happened to be reading while pondering this story of David and Goliath and which seemed to connect with it. The book is called *Hillbilly Elegy* and it caused quite a stir when it was published a couple of years ago, becoming a massive best seller. The book is subtitled ‘A memoir of a family and culture in crisis’ and what is revealing about the book and why it has been so widely read is that it provides some explanation for features of the world today that leave many people troubled and perplexed – not least the election and the behaviour of the current President of the United States of America, which the book touches on. ‘The crisis in our culture’, however, that the book’s subtitle refers to goes far beyond the election of this President. It relates to a wider crisis that is being felt in the UK and beyond, including here in the Netherlands. *Hillbilly Elegy* is written by J.D Vance and it is his story, but I think it is significant for reading the David and Goliath story in our world today, for in Vance’s experience we see many of the Goliaths that we currently face: social and political and

personal Goliaths, and we recognise the way they act upon us and the threat they pose.

Vance was born in the USA in Kentucky, in the Appalachian mountains and into a white, conservative, working-class culture described as hillbilly, a culture that embraced loyalty, patriotism, toughness and a fierce and sometimes lethal sense of justice. He was raised, however, in the Rust Belt town of Middletown in Ohio, mainly by his maternal grandparents. Vance's story is woven into the story of Middletown, a once prosperous town dominated by a steel plant which provided employment and which lavished resources upon the town, building schools and parks and where his grandparent were able to live a relatively prosperous middle-class life. Behind that prosperous, middle class life however lay Vance's deeply dysfunctional family: his mother was a drug addict with a constant turn-over of partners and a history of violence and abuse. And that family story of chaos and hardship is mirrored in the surroundings of Middletown, Ohio, as the big steel plant is shut down in the '70s and '80s as production moves to Asia, and the town's main street is strewn with shuttered shopfronts and becomes a haven for drug-dealers. And in such circumstances of decline Vance chronicles what he sees as the catastrophic effects of welfare programmes that create, he maintains, a culture of dependency and entitlement and that sap people's initiative and their capacity to fight back. And with that goes a resentment against government, a deep alienation from those in power but who are utterly out of touch and who are blamed for everything. And along with all that goes fierce opposition to anyone who is perceived to be getting a free ride - including, of course, immigrants and even, it seems, the children of immigrants. And all this of course goes some way towards explaining events in the US and beyond.

Well, Vance's story is one of the triumph of David against overwhelming social, political and family Goliaths. Basically Vance refuses to blame others for his predicament and he determines to better himself and to make wise decisions – one of which is to join the marines. Here, he would say, he became a man as there was instilled in him a pride and a resilience that enabled him to overcome his dysfunctional background. From there he went to college and thence to Yale University

and he is now a high-flier in a global technology investment firm in San Francisco.

So to what do we attribute Vance's redemption, his success? The danger, I suggest, would be to see his story simplistically as a lone David overcoming the Goliaths of his background. What Vance's book reveals – and what he acknowledges – is the network of support that encouraged and sustained him: his extraordinary sister, his aunt, and in due course his wife - but above all his wonderful, feisty, foul-mouthed grandmother who inspired him to make the right choices and to better himself. And this is important as there is a variety of self-help advice and therapy on offer at present which basically tells people to shape up, to stop blaming others and to make something of their lives. And it's individualistic and it throws people back on themselves and it ignores our social nature and the fact that no-one is an island.

And here we return to David and his triumph over Goliath. This is not a story of individual heroism. It is not just the little guy humbling the giant. David's encounter with Goliath is framed within a wider context. For a start he belongs to a community, to the nation of Israel which has a strong sense of identity, and it is partly David's loyalty to Israel and his anguish at seeing his people cowed by Goliath that fires him. But beyond that, David's life is framed by the God whose hand has held him and who has been at work in him. As David says, 'The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of the Philistine.' In other words there is another factor in this situation. It is not just David versus Goliath. It is not just Israel versus the Philistines. David has been protected and sustained not by his own superior strength or skill but by this other agent who is present and active – the living God. As David says, 'the battle is the Lord's!' This is David's secret: this is not really David against Goliath at all – it is the Lord against Goliath. And as we encounter our own Goliaths we hear echoes of Paul's great affirmation in the Letter to the Romans, 'if God is for us, who is against us?' And we are reminded of David when Paul goes on to exclaim, 'No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...'

This morning we had the joy of baptising little Enzo. Who knows what Goliaths he will face in his life – social, political, personal? And we

thank God for Enzo's family, but beyond his flesh and blood family Enzo is baptised into a wider community, the new Israel, the church in which his identity is rooted and his life is grounded. Here lie all the riches and resources of Christ. And to repeat what I said when I baptised him, these great baptismal words that come from a French Reformed liturgy:

For you, little child,

Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered.

For you he entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of Calvary.

For you he uttered the cry, "It is finished!"

For you he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there he intercedes — for you, little child, even though you do not know it.

But in this way the word of the Gospel becomes true. "We love him, because he first loved us."

That is the assurance of the Gospel, the heart of our baptism. And it is surely more than a match for any Goliath. Amen and to God be all praise and glory forever.

O gracious God,
Our Maker, our Saviour, our Protector,
we praise you for your love which is new every morning,
for you grace that accompanies us throughout our days,
for your faithfulness that holds on to us
through thick and thin.

And we praise you for your Son Jesus Christ,
our Lord and Saviour.

In him your love and grace and faithfulness become flesh;
in him you become visible and tangible
and in him you take our side,
standing with us in everything that threatens us
and all that would harm us.

We thank you for Jesus who came to defeat
sin and death and to free us from all that would belittle us.

We confess to you our captivity to the very things that destroy us.

We confess our failure to stand up to all that resists your rule.

And we thank you that through Jesus we are set free.

Help us, we pray to lead faithful lives, courageous lives,
lives that triumph over all that would resist you and your rule.

We pray these things in Jesus' name and in his words we pray
together, saying...